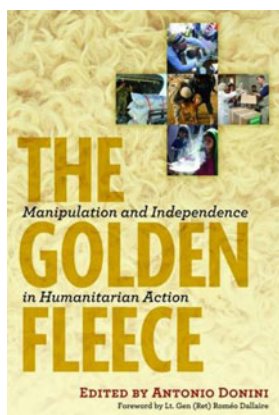


BOOK REVIEW



The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action

Antonio Donini (ed.)*

Reviewed by Michael Barnett**

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A product of scholars, researchers, and friends of the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, *The Golden Fleece* makes two very important points and makes them very well. The first is that instrumentalization is all around humanitarianism. Everyone instrumentalizes everyone else. Donors instrumentalize aid agencies, using them to advance their political and strategic interests. Aid agencies instrumentalize victims, using them to raise money by circulating their moments of hardship and suffering. Individuals can play the role of victim in order to gain access to resources, and victims themselves might try to prolong their status in order to maintain access to basic goods. And then there are the aid profiteers, including militias and warlords, whose own interests are often premised on increasing the suffering of local populations and then skimming off the aid that is sent by outsiders to help the victims. As Cole Porter might have hummed, ‘Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it’.

The second point is that instrumentalization is as old as humanitarianism. We might think that it is new, but it is not. We might think that it is increasing, but there are good reasons to think that it is as bad as it ever was. *The Golden Fleece*

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is a wonderful work that combines scholarship and commitment, fine-grained observations and almost timeless reflections, and the past and the present.

In the introduction, Antonio Donini writes that instrumentalization is 'a shorthand for the use of humanitarian action or rhetoric as a tool to pursue political, security, military, development, economic and other non-humanitarian goals'.¹ This definition creates a wide expanse of action to count as instrumentalization, and the chapters of the volume amply demonstrate the myriad and creative ways in which actors have instrumentalized humanitarianism and the effects of such instrumentalization. In Part One, Ian Smillie and Larry Minear quickly bury any notions that instrumentalization is a recent discovery of the opportunistically minded. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) owes its existence to the fact that European powers believed that humanitarianism was a useful way of saving war from itself. Great Powers involved themselves in nineteenth-century humanitarian action to the extent that they could serve their broader imperial ambitions. Humanitarian actors have used the suffering of others to advance their various agendas, including their desire to increase their budgets and advance their visibility. Instrumentalization is a constant presence throughout the history of humanitarianism.

Part Two consists of a series of very detailed and well-written cases of post-Cold War episodes of instrumentalization. In his chapter on Afghanistan, Antonio Donini highlights the relationship between the growing presence of instrumentalizing Great Powers and the difficulty of delivering assistance to those in need. Helen Young's fascinating chapter on Darfur contains various insights, including an argument regarding the relationship between ways of labelling a conflict and the degree of instrumentalization: it was a lot harder to instrumentalize Darfur when it was an emergency than when it was a post-conflict situation. Pakistan could have been the site for the adage 'no good disaster should go without being instrumentalized'. Indeed, a chart outlining the disasters and the culprits of instrumentalization takes two full pages (and it looks like it could easily have gone on for several more pages). By the time I got to the chapter on Somalia, I concluded that there cannot be a book on cases of non-instrumentalization because they do not exist. A conversation with the former Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) provides an opportunity for someone who was a constant victim of instrumentalization to let his frustrations fly. Mark Schuller's chapter on Haiti is organized around the different actors who have instrumentalized aid at different points in Haiti's tragic history. The tone of the book becomes more passionate in Part Three, as Dan Maxwell outlines how the instrumentalization of food aid, quite literally, takes food from the mouths of the dying, and Norah Niland shows how difficult protection becomes once actors decide to instrumentalize humanitarianism. The only people who do not benefit from the instrumentalization of humanitarian action are the victims themselves. In the conclusion, Antonio Donini and Peter Walker reflect on whether those in the aid community will try to do what they can to minimize their instrumentalization (probably not) and whether

1 *The Golden Fleece*, p. 2.

the changing patterns of disasters might make instrumentalization less likely (probably not).

Let me try to offer a cheery counterpoint to the volume's depressing observations. Instrumentalization is probably not as omnipresent as the volume suggests. The definition of instrumentalization is so loose that almost no actions can be excluded. In fact, it could include the very act of humanitarianism itself – many people give not because they want to help people in need but rather because they want to sleep better at night, get closer to God, and impress their friends. In other words, if we assume that givers have mixed motives, then included in those motives are other goals that do not include the relief of suffering. Consequently, this definition probably overcounts most of what we would think as instrumentalization. A less encompassing definition might restrict the definition to the intended use of humanitarian action in ways that knowingly harm the goal of the alleviation of suffering. The volume's definition of instrumentalization is too encompassing, distracting from what many care about: those who intentionally use humanitarianism even though they have reason to believe that doing so might come at the cost of lives. For instance, while the volume includes examples of how aid agencies tell stories that portray the situation as worse than it is, I am not sure that this really counts as an instance of instrumentalization. It might be deceitful, and it might have all kinds of unintended consequences for disaster response down the road, but is this an instance of instrumentalization? I don't think so.

Instrumentalization might appear to be more ubiquitous and harmful than it really is because of the volume's working definition of humanitarianism: the impartial, neutral, and independent delivery of relief to victims of conflict and natural disasters. The underlying assumption of the book is that humanitarian action works best when it is most pure, and it is most pure when it is limited to these principles and this particular goal; conversely, the moment that it departs from these principles and becomes more ambitious is the very moment that instrumentalization becomes more pronounced and the fundamental goal of saving lives is compromised. But such a stance precludes the possibility that a relaxation of these goals might, at times, advance the goal of saving lives. It is an empirical question whether these principles best serve this function. And, raising this as an empirical matter suggests that these principles of humanitarianism are, themselves, instruments.

Lastly, is instrumentalization so bad? Part of this depends on what the alternatives are. I might agree with the proposition that 'pure' humanitarianism is more likely to serve the objective of saving lives, but what if no one wants to give to pure humanitarianism? In other words, what is the alternative to instrumentalization? It might be, to paraphrase Marx's views on exploitation, the only thing worse than being instrumentalized is not being instrumentalized at all. Marx, of course, was a huge critic of exploitation. He saw exploitation all around him and he was keenly sensitive to even the barest of indicators. For him exploitation, though, was part of all past and present economic systems, and there would be no escape until socialism removed the conditions for exploitation. Yet astute readers of Marx also recognized that exploitation might be a necessary evil. Most individuals needed to be

exploited if they were going to survive. If individuals were not exploited through the labour process, then they became part of underemployment and condemned to a life of abject poverty and misery. Exploitation is bad, but there are lots of worse things in life. In general, while the volume makes the case that some kinds of instrumentalization are harmful to the goal of saving lives, it might very well be that other kinds of instrumentalization at other times actually further this goal. After all, Marx thought that exploitation was not only an endemic feature of most economic systems, but that it was better than not being exploited at all, and probably necessary for making life a little better in the immediate term and for creating the conditions for more radical change. Long live instrumentalization? Perhaps not, but we know it will live as long as humanitarianism does.